

PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS – THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE CODE OF ATHENS

Author:

Tom Watson PhD

Professor of Public Relations

Bournemouth University

Poole, Dorset BH12 5BB, UK

Email: twatson@bournemouth.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1202 961986

ABSTRACT

In 1965, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) adopted an International Code of Ethics, which became known as the Code of Athens, as its statement of public relations ethics. The Code reflected the hopeful, post-World War 2 ethical framework with its linkage to the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948. It was the first international code of ethics enacted in the public relations field.

Many public relations leaders of the time saw public relations as a force for social progress and a bulwark against oppressive regimes in the Communist world and military dictatorships. A code of ethics was an early imperative of IPRA which came into being 10 years earlier. It came after a Code of Conduct, adopted in 1961, which was known as the Code of Venice. Both codes were adopted by CERP and several national public relations associations and widely promoted.

Using sources from the IPRA archive, the paper explores the evolution of the Code, its implementation and modification. A feature of the debate within IPRA about the Code was whether it was a statement of ideals to which members should aspire or a statement of standards. The view of prominent IPRA members from Anglo-American countries was that the Code, while laudable, was unenforceable. There are, however, no archived records of disciplinary action against members.

The paper will also consider the practice implications of preparing and implementing universal ethical statements in public relations and allied communication fields.

PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS – THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE CODE OF ATHENS

Introduction

At Athens, Greece on May 12, 1965, the International Public Relations Association adopted a draft of an International Code of Ethics for public relations practice. The Code had been an object of the nascent IPRA since 1952 and was to become a major promotional strategy of the organisation as it grew from the mid-1960s onwards. Largely written by the French public relations leader Lucien Matrat (IPRA 2001), it followed an earlier IPRA Code of Conduct (known as the Code of Venice) and was adopted wholly or in a modified form by many public relations professional associations in subsequent years (IPRA 1995).

In this paper, which is based on material from the IPRA archive held at Bournemouth University (Watson, 2011), the formation of the Code of Athens is traced from the early 1950s until the early 1970s in a chronological manner. It discusses IPRA's presentation of the Code externally, as well as the internal debate between two leading members about its relevance and implementation, which led to major revision just three years after it was adopted. Reviewing the great emphasis on the Code's dissemination by its main author, Lucien Matrat, the paper will also consider whether it became a publicity strategy of IPRA and not the proposed standard for ethics in public relations sought by its founders. There will also be consideration of the role of ethical codes and whether they can be 'universal' across all cultures, religions and ethical backgrounds, as IPRA hoped and claimed. This will, it is hoped, advise current ethical discussions in public relations.

Ethical Codes

Most public relations professional bodies and trade associations have some form of ethical and/or practice rule or code. They are too numerous to reference in detail but typical examples are those of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) in the United Kingdom. CIPR has a four-section document including a Code of Conduct; while PRCA has a Professional Charter for all members plus specialist versions for public affairs and healthcare. Both have complaints and arbitration procedures. The PRCA code commences with a general exhortation for members:

A member shall:

- 1.1 Have a positive duty to observe the highest standards in the practice of public relations. Furthermore a member has the responsibility at all times to deal fairly and honestly with fellow members and professionals, the public relations profession, other professionals, suppliers, intermediaries, the media of communication, colleagues, and above all, the public. (PRCA, undated, p. 1)

CIPR has similar tenets in its Principles which have four elements – Integrity, Competence, Transparency and avoiding conflicts of interest, and Confidentiality (CIPR, undated). Bowen (2007) comments that in public relations, ethics includes values such as honesty, openness, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication” (p.1). These values appear to be widely applied around the world. Many codes also have a “best interests of the profession” element, for example the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Wright (2006) says that PRSA had “enhancing the professional” as a fundamental value of U.S. public relations practitioners (p. 190).

L. Grunig & Toth (2006) noted that many public relations bodies “have norms or codes of ethics that prescribe respect for diversity and cultural difference” (p. 46). They particularly identified the IPRA code of ethics as stating that its members shall “pay due regard to, and uphold, human dignity, and ... recognize the right of each individual to judge for himself/herself” (ibid, p. 46). International public relations associations, of which IPRA was the first one, have “led in recognizing the importance of diversity and cultural interest – perhaps because their members have frequently crossed borders” (ibid, p. 47).

Wright (2006), a long-time prominent IPRA member and a leading US public relations academic, also acknowledges the Code of Athens obligation for respect of human rights including those related to “intellectual, moral and social needs” (p. 189). He also introduces its moral core which separates it from the many codes of conducts for practitioners:

The code recognizes the power of public relations in the global society, noting the need for ethical conduct by public relations professionals who have the ability to reach and potentially influence millions of people. Such power must be restrained, according to the code, “by observance of a strict moral code” (ibid, p.189).

In the history of the Code of Athens’ development and implementation, which follows, the insertion of a human rights-focused moral core for this Code of Ethics will be seen to be an unintended consequence of IPRA’s founders’ desire to establish such a code. Other elements of this code and the Code of Conduct (the “Code of Venice” adopted in 1961) were similar to other professional codes of their time and have significantly influenced current codes, as indicated by Bowen (2007), CIPR (Undated), L. Grunig & Toth (2006), PRCA (Undated), and Wright (2006).

Evolution of Codes

Although IPRA was not formally established until 1955, discussions in Europe had begun in 1949. Among its draft ‘Objects’ agreed in 1952 was a code of ethics on an international scale. Minutes from 1953 report on the previous year’s discussions:

- (i) Aims and objectives

That an International Association should have as its aims

- a) The raising of the standards of Public Relations practice in all countries
- c) Explaining public relations to the world outside the profession
- e) Consideration of the problems facing public relations officers in all countries ... professional ethics (linking the codes now being compiled in several countries) (London & Hastings Minutes, 1953, p. 3)

It can be seen that preparation of a code of ethics was a priority task. This was reinforced in 1955 when IPRA was established at a meeting in London on April 29, 1955: a modified version of the 1952 decision was adopted as an 'Object for the Association':

- e) To review and seek solutions to problems affecting public relations practice common to various countries, including such questions as the status of the profession, codes of professional ethics and qualifications to practice (London Minutes, 1955, p. 4).

At its second Council meeting in The Hague, Holland later that year, a French member Etienne Bloch was commissioned to undertake research into "professional ethics, status and qualifications" (Hague Minutes, 1955, p. 3) and prepare a report. This was presented to the Council's next meeting in Paris the following year and IPRA decided to move forward:

It was generally agreed that the Association should move towards a position where it could advise its members of the professional standards expected of them (Minutes underlining), and that work should continue towards this end after the Council members had had an opportunity of studying the subject in the light of local conditions in their various countries (Paris Minutes, 1956, p.6).

(Bloch's reports are not in the IPRA archives). A leading US practitioner Robert L. Bliss was the chair of the IPRA Research Committee at the time. In a later memoir he reported that the Code of Ethics was a very high priority goal for the new association but that it was developed as a Code of Conduct. The Code of Ethics came later, as he explained.

Goal 1: To develop and propose a Code of Ethics. There was some question over the use of the word 'Ethics' at such an early stage in IPRA's development, so the name was changed to 'Conduct'. The 10-member international committee worked diligently for four years on the Code which was reviewed and accepted by the Board at the Second World Public Relations Congress in Venice in 1961 (Bliss, 1984, p.41).

This priority was also stated in the Minutes of the Fifth Council meeting in Brussels in 1958. A progress report was accepted at The Hague in 1960 with agreement that IPRA's Constitution would be amended "to provide for the inclusion of a code of conduct as soon as this has been drafted and at the same time to include procedure to enforce the code once adopted" (The Hague Minutes, 1960, p.14).

Code of Venice

The Code of Professional Conduct (see Appendix 1) was adopted with minor amendments at the Council meeting in Venice on May 22, 1961 (Venice Minutes, 1961) and was agreed by the IPRA Assembly and 2nd IPRA World Congress (IPRA, 1995) the following day. It quickly became known as ‘The Code of Venice’.

The Code of Conduct, occasionally contemporaneously referred to a code of ethics (Paris Minutes, 1962), set out standards of conduct towards employers and clients, the public and media, and towards colleagues. Much later in 2009, “conduct towards digital channels of communication” was added (IPRA Code of Venice, 1961 & 2009, p. 2). The general tone was similar to current codes of practice (as mentioned above). There were calls for fair dealing, honesty, respect for confidential matters, public interest and practitioner reputation. It also forbade acceptance of bribes, and the undermining of a fellow practitioner’s relationship with an employer or clients. Although IPRA’s history later claims that disciplinary enforcement of the Code was to be passed to national PR bodies (IPRA, 1995), there are no records that this decision was made. In 1962, it formed a Professional Practices Committee “to enforce respect for the Code of Conduct” and decided that the “Code of Conduct should be included in the application form and signed by all new members joining up” (Paris Minutes, 1962, pp. 13-14). This Committee continued well into the 1970s.

The Code of Athens

The decision to create a Code of Ethics is not recorded in the extant IPRA archive. There are, however, two narratives which were later compressed into one story of IPRA’s commitment to a higher standard of ethics in its content and aspirations. According to the Minutes of IPRA Council meetings, there is no mention of a plan for a Code of Ethics until it was launched by Lucien Matrat at the Montreal Council meeting in November 1964. The minutes of the Berlin 1963 Council meeting, however, refer to comments by the chair of the Professional Practices Committee there was “difficulty in enforcing the Code of Conduct. Some countries have voluntarily adopted the IPRA Code. The aim should be to achieve a world-wide common pattern of ethics” (Berlin Minutes, 1963, p. 8). No Council decision was, however, made to progress a Code of Ethics.

However, Matrat’s and IPRA’s narratives tell of the formation of a working group, led by him, meeting throughout 1964. Its members included the current IPRA president John Keyser and a past-President Denys Brook-Hart, five French practitioners and a French and a Belgian academic. A more recent IPRA documents claims, quite erroneously, that it was joint effort involving senior office-holders and academics:

The original draft of the Code was prepared with the help of the 1963-65 IPRA President John A. Keyser, IPRA Secretary Manos Pavlidis, CERP Chairman Guido Rossi del Lion Nero and Philippe Hurteau and Vincent Levaux, both representing the university

teachers. It based on the United Nations “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and was adopted unanimously by the IPRA General Assembly in Athens, Greece May 1965 (IPRA, 2001, p.6).

IPRA’s records of the formation of the Code of Athens do not support this presentation. For example, Guido Rossi del Lion Nero is not even mentioned in Matrat’s own records and it was not adopted unanimously at the Athens meeting, but provisionally accepted. Adoption came later the same year. IPRA’s 40th anniversary history publication (IPRA 1995) claims that the association had been a full party to the draft code presented by Matrat to the IPRA-organised World Public Relations Conference in Montreal, Canada in November 1964 and that it has been presented by a past-President, Denys Brook-Hart. Minutes, however, clearly demonstrate that it had been a surprise to the IPRA Council which had not seen it before:

The President informed the Council that Mr. Lucien Matrat has produced a paper for the World Congress on “Ethics and Conduct”. His proposal was to establish an international code of ethics. In his paper he emphasized the difference between a code of conduct and a code of ethics. Mr Keyser [then IPRA President] felt that this was an important matter and both he and Mr de la Motte [French Council member] hoped that IPRA would take cognisance of this proposal before the World Congress. He recommended that this paper should be read by members and discussed at the Athens meeting ... Copies of the paper will be made available to members of the Council (Montreal Minutes, 1964, p. 16).

This shows clearly that John Keyser, who was named by Matrat and IPRA’s histories (IPRA 1995, 2001) as an integral member of the team which prepared the Code of Ethics, had doubts about its rapid adoption. In Athens, he again expressed caution but voted for adoption. Later IPRA’s *Newsletter*, which was posted to members, does not appear to have communicated either code to members. Although the file is incomplete, copies held in the archive from 1959 to 1979 have no substantial reference to the Codes, for example in a draft form for members to peruse and consider. There is one reference to Code of Venice amendments in a March 1962 edition (IPRA Newsletter, March 1962) There are, however, three missing copies in mid-1965 when the Code of Ethics was provisionally adopted (in May) and later approved at the end of the year. There is a passing reference to its mention in *Communique*, another IPRA newsletter, in 1965 (Eden-Green correspondence, 1968) but there are no copies of this in the archive.

IPRA’s later narrative was that there was “wide consultation prior to its (Code of Ethics) unanimous adoption by the General Assembly at Athens on 12 May 1965” (IPRA, 1995, p. 92). This was highly inaccurate as the IPRA Council preceding the General Assembly had grave doubts about its adoption without consulting the membership.

Mr Pavlidis [IPRA Hon Secretary] spoke in favour of the adoption of the proposed Code of Ethics as it would raise the status of the public relations. Mr Keyser pointed out that the regular members of IPRA had not had the opportunity to study the proposed Code but

could not see why Council should not accept it. Milton Fairman asked if there was a copy in English (Athens Minutes, 1965, p. 4).

(Fairman's comment was appropriate as Matrat operated solely in French and presented papers to IPRA only in his native language). Other Council members argued that it should not be mandatory on members; that Council could not accept it before members had seen it. It was decided that the Council would accept the draft Code but that members would be sent the draft. "It was agreed to call this Code the Code of Athens" (Athens Minutes, 1965, p. 4). The Council would later adopt the Code of Ethics but in mid-1965, it was as much a mystery to its members as it was to the general membership.

Before discussing the dissemination and implementation of the Code of Athens, it is relevant to consider the attitudes and influence of Lucien Matrat, a major figure of western European public relations over a 30-year period but who has little recognition elsewhere. Matrat was considered to be the "father of public relations in France" (Boiry, 1989, cited in Xifra, 2012) and became a dominant figure in the French-speaking world and in Spain forming a "European doctrine of public relations" in the early 1970s. He was the founder-president of the Centre Européenne des Relations Publique (CERP) for an initial six year period from the late 1950s. This was a time when CERP and IPRA had many common senior members. Matrat retained an influential leadership position as Secretary-General in CERP for most of two decades.

A public relations manager for the French-owned Elf petroleum group throughout his career, he considered PR methods used by American oil companies were propagandist and "lacking respect for individuals. He therefore became interested in the ethical nature of public relations and its distinction from propaganda and advertising (Xifra 2012, p. 565).

His enduring international influence is the Code of Athens, which Xifra argues, "is another example of the anthropology of public relations founded by Matrat" (2012, p. 569). Matrat, he adds, "acted as an anthropologist of the moral" (ibid). The Frenchman stated in 1975 that "without ethical practice, public relations has no purpose" (Matrat, 1975, cited in Xifra, 2012, p. 569). For the IPRA leadership in 1965, the humanist philosophical content of Matrat's approach to ethics was probably subordinated to their appreciation that he was a willing and influential volunteer who prepared a Code of Ethics. The UK public relations pioneer, Tim Traverse-Healy, the sole living founder of IPRA, acknowledged this pragmatic aspect in a 2011 interview:

We were an idealistic lot and I think we were setting the concept of the idea of public relations and could see that reflected in the code of ethics as produced by Lucien Matrat...We felt it would help define public relations internationally...IPRA could use it by having it documented (and) codified...and Lucien Matrat picked up the baton and worked extremely hard (Traverse-Healy, 2011, p. 9).

He continued:

It's all part of this whole feeling of post-war, brave new world, everything else like this, League of Nations, young, modern sense, camaraderie, new world and so on. And therefore the thought that we all had a community of standards was seen as a good thing; Matrat tapped into that (Traverse-Healy, 2011, p. 10).

The code proposed by Matrat, in French, was based strongly on the UN Declaration of Human Rights. He proposed it as a universal code of ethics for public relations and an important differentiator of public relations from what he considered lesser forms of communication such as advertising and promotional propaganda. The philosophy of public relations, as noted above, was an important anthropological concept for him:

Mr Matrat explained the need for such a Code and said that by such a Code we were proposing to enter into the dialogue of civilisation. That dialogue requires the respect of the moral rights of man as an individual (Athens Minutes, 1965, p.3).

He argued the mantra that public relations was a higher calling and later, in 1969, told an IPRA meeting in Dublin that “true ethics are not just to be a moral background, but also a mode of professional and everyday life, underlining the role of PR as a continuous effort towards the acceptance of sincere and sound human relations” (Dublin Minutes, 1969, p. 6). In 1978, he continued to promote his case for the Code as it “both differentiates public relations from merely a type of sociological propaganda, and becomes, because of its principles, a fundamental code of behaviour” (Matrat, 1978, p. 15).

Matrat's case for a code of ethics in addition to a code of conduct or practice was made many times within IPRA. It is captured in IPRA's 40th anniversary history which expresses the Matrat paradigm:

...national codes of professional conduct must take into account the laws, usages and customs in force in each country and the prevailing circumstances. An ethical code, however, prescribes the behaviour of public relations practitioners in relation to people, considered as 'human beings'. Since the nature of the human being is universal, there can only be one ethical code (p. 92).

This was consistent with his promotion of the ethical canon as being universal and thus above the pragmatic behaviours of practitioners and their work relationships. Its conception as a complete set of strictures, however, fell foul of anglo-America practitioners with a different view of the liberties of human behaviour.

The “good thing” Code that Matrat produced comprises a contextual introduction linked to the UN Declaration of Human Rights. This is followed by 13 elements or rules. (See Appendix 2 for the full code).

The introduction explains the fundamental rights and dignity of all human and states that public relations practitioners “can substantially help to meet these intellectual, moral and social needs” (IPRA 2001, p.6). The use of techniques that permit communication with millions of people gives practitioners “a power to be restrained by the observance of a strict moral code” (ibid, p. 6). In three clusters, these call for (1) practitioners to aid fellow humans to achieve their full stature and rights; to foster free flow of information; to conduct themselves in a manner that gives confidence to others; and to consider their public-professional and private behaviour as having an effect on the profession’s reputation; 2) To observe the Declaration of Human Rights; have regard to the dignity of others; establish moral conditions for true dialogue for all parties; act in the best interests of all parties – organisation and publics; act personally to avoid misunderstanding and with integrity to all parties; and (3) be truthful, circulate information based on ascertainable fact; not take part in any activity affecting human dignity and integrity; and not use any manipulative methods (IPRA, 2001).

While elements calling for truthful and non-manipulative communication, behaviour that builds confidence in others and recognition of the integrity of others are common in codes, the Code of Athens’s link to the Declaration of Human Rights and claims upon personal behaviour proved difficult for some members. For example, the first and fourth rules were that members:

Shall (initially Must) Endeavour

- To contribute to the achievement of the moral and cultural conditions enabling human beings to reach their full stature and enjoy the indefeasible rights to which they are entitled under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- To bear in mind that because of the relationship between his/her profession and the public, his/her conduct – even in private – will have an impact on the way in which the profession as a whole is appraised (IPRA, 2001, p. 7).

At one end of the spectrum, practitioners were being asked to change the world; at the other they had to have exemplary private lives. In other situations, it was possible for members working in countries with less-than-perfect human rights and information controls to be automatically in breach of the Code, but with little or no chance to remedy the situation. As the critical response to the Code shows in the next section, IPRA had slept-walked into a morally-intense code which was not implementable. Rather than repent, it chose to use it as a promotional tool.

Criticism and revision

Although the Code had been adopted in 1965 and further endorsed at the Barcelona meeting in 1966 (Barcelona Minutes, 1966), there was continued debate about its relevance to public relations practice. The critique was led by Alan Eden-Green of the UK, Chief Executive – Public Relations for the British Oxygen Company (BOC). The Code was again debated at the

IPRA Council in Rio de Janeiro in 1967 (Rio Minutes, 1967), after which Eden-Green wrote to Matrat, who had not attended.

His contention was that the Code placed many IPRA members automatically in breach of its rules but was also restricting their human rights to take employment as they wished. The tenor of Eden-Green comments is very terse. They are worth considering in detail as they indicate the problems of creating universal ethical codes which do not account for cultural/social understandings or effective implementation:

...it is the way the Code is worded, that inevitably involves us in political matters. It seems to me, if we are honest about it, that the sections I quoted place a moral obligation to raise a protest when we see human liberty or dignity being threatened, but they certainly would prevent any IPRA member from working for a government which does not uphold Human Rights. The Code, in fact, is not a set of guide-lines, but a set of rules. It says “must” and “must not”. I doubt whether that was your intention but, as you know, I have always had the misgiving that it was too rigid and put us off being committed to a set of standards we could not live up to (Eden-Green correspondence, 17 October 1967).

Eden-Green continued, making a case for a more pragmatic approach:

I believe – and so do many of my British colleagues – that such Codes are highly desirable, but only provided they will stand the test of examination. At the moment we most certainly have members working for governments which, it could be said, restrict basic human rights...I personally believe the Code should be regarded only as an ideal and that it is not practicable to restrict our members in the way the Code appears to do (Eden-Green correspondence, 17 October 1967).

Eden-Green concluded by offering his support for the Code with “acceptable wording” and asked for Matrat to send him six copies of the Code in English.

Matrat replied, as usual, in French in early November 1967 defending his approach which was based on the UN Declaration of Human Rights and citing the endorsement of religious leaders, including Pope Paul VI, as justification for it. He also proposed that IPRA could invoke the Code against a country which was restricting human rights or limiting the media.

Eden-Green was not mollified by Matrat’s response, but commented collegially that “there is no great difference of opinion between us” (Eden-Green correspondence, 24 November 1967). He added that his concern remained with the wording of the Code and not its aims or content. In response to Matrat’s case that the Code had social and religious support, Eden-Green struck back with:

It has not (author's emphasis) been praised by any high religious or political authorities in this country. The latter, I am sure, would immediately say: "This is fine – Do you enforce it?" To which we would have to say: "No".

You see, the Code is not worded as if it were an ideal to aim at. It says, quite specifically, that a person must "Respect and uphold the dignity of the human person ..." etc. "and must undertake not to lend his assistance to ..." (Eden-Green correspondence, 24 November 1967).

Eden-Green argued later in the letter that IPRA members must be allowed to act according to their conscience. He warned that IPRA was in danger of over-promoting the Code and should publicise it. "Public Relations has suffered a great deal here (the UK) and in the USA because it has sometimes made claims that it could not honour" (ibid). There were misgivings about the Code from other Council members in Rio and some amendments were needed to allay their fears and made the Code. "If we do not do this, we remain very vulnerable to public criticism" (ibid).

Eden-Green had continued doubts about the Code: "Personally I would like to see the Code completely redrafted" (Eden-Green correspondence, 8 April, 1968). He offered minor but textually important changes such as replacing "Shall Undertake" with "Shall Endeavour" in clauses 5-9. These moved the emphasis from demand to best effort. Eden-Green's central point was that the Code "imposes a condition which I do not think we can always demand of our members" (Eden-Green Correspondence, 8 April 1968). At IPRA's Tehran meeting in 1968, his amendments were accepted (Tehran Minutes, 1968).

The Code as a PR strategy

Using a five-step strategy promoted by Matrat, IPRA had gained support from many national public relations bodies and had staged photo-based presentation events that involved Pope Paul VI, the presidents of India and the Council of Europe and various heads of state and government ministers. While these gave 'name check' value to the Code and promoted its acceptance in the public relations sector, Matrat's strategy was baser in its desired outcomes than he had promoted earlier.

In March 1967, he had circulated a strategy document with the portentous title of 'Procedure recommended for the using the Code of Athens for the purpose of reaching a wider audience and obtaining prestige for our profession' (Matrat, 1967). Seeking 'prestige' for public relations had not been one of the Code's 13 rules, but the Frenchman wanted the Code to demonstrate that "public relations (is) a guide to social behaviour and as a science of communications" (ibid, p. 1). It was also "the only way to differentiate public relations from a certain type of sociological propaganda" (ibid, p. 2).

IPRA's history has a section entitled 'Enforcement of the Ethical Code' (IPRA, 1995, p. 92) which says that the organisation soon after the Code was adopted had "rejected the idea of a disciplinary council but the Code should have the widest possible dissemination" (ibid, p. 92). There is no evidence for this decision in the IPRA archives, which carry reports from the Professional Practices Committee and the 'Code Matters' committee (anglicised version of its French title) to its Council. Indeed, there are examples of reports stating positively that no transgressions had been reported. From 1965 to 2002 (the last date of material in the archive), there are no archival references to any IPRA member being either reported for a breach of either Code or being disciplined.

This apparent anomaly has been raised by this author with four past Presidents and Secretaries whose IPRA corporate memories range from 1965 to 2002 (and beyond). None recalled any member being disciplined under the Code of Ethics. For an organisation which was based on personal membership, this is an extraordinarily exemplary disciplinary performance across 37 years. Perhaps Matrat's prestige-building strategy delivered results but it can be contended that for all its lofty attributes, there is little evidence that the Code of Athens could be implemented in order to police public relations' moral behaviour.

Discussion and conclusions

The Code of Athens continued in its 1968 modified form until 2011 when it was merged with other IPRA codes into a single 18-point code. In one way, it had passed a test of endurance. Although it is extensively referred to books, there is little evidence that it was much more than a promotional tool for IPRA as its photo files of presentations show. IPRA, as noted above, does not appear to have ever invoked the Code against a member. Its membership, which only ever peaked at little more than 1000 in 1980s, was obviously not attracted by the moral stance, although this may have been a minor judgement as most national PR bodies already had codes of conduct well established by the late 1960s.

Wright (2006) argues that the Code of Athens has benefits and as well as defining "truth" in information dissemination in a more demanding manner than other codes:

(It) addresses the importance of informed decision making. Under this code, public relations professionals should "recognize the right of each individual to judge for himself/herself." The code states that practitioners should establish conditions for dialogue" that recognize the rights of parties involved to express their views. As such, the model seems to reflect the democratic ideals of marketplace models adopted in the United States and elsewhere.

... In the section that outlines prohibited behaviours, the Code of Athens requires that "the truth" should not be subordinated to other requirements and information "not based on established and ascertainable facts" should not be circulated. This last provision seems to suggest that truth can be defined on a more objective standard – i.e. that truth can be

judged by whether the information is provably true or false – than do many codes, including the PRSA code, which requires members to “adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth (Wright, 2006, p. 180).

For modern codes of practice, the IPRA example has practical lessons worth considering. These are that an organisation should not walk blindly into adoption of such statements. Matrat, with great belief in humanist ethical principles and considerably guile, took on a task while the organisation dithered in the years 1962 to 1964 and delivered a solution which was adopted on behalf of members. There must be a ground-up approach to ethics in order that there is wide acceptance of codes and rules, and the ability to implement them. IPRA was forced to retain an ethical Code which it was never to invoke. The outcome was that it became a promotional tool – a classic “PR exercise”, as Matrat later commented (Matrat, 1978).

NOTE: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Public Relations Research Conference, Miami, FL in March 2013.

References

- Bliss, R. L. (1984). IPRA: The first 15 years. *IPRA Review*, 8(3), 40-41.
- Boiry, P. A. (1989). *Les relations-publiques ou la stratégie de la confiance*. Paris: Eyrolles.
- Bowen, S. (2007). *Ethics and public relations*. Gainesville, FL: Institute for Public Relations.
Retrieved from: <http://instituteforpr.org/topics/ethics-and-public-relations/>.
- CIPR (undated) – Chartered Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct and Complaints Procedure. London: CIPR. Retrieved from:
<http://www.cipr.co.uk/sites/default/files/CIPR%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf>.
- Eden- Green, A. (1967-68). *Correspondence on Code of Athens*. IPRA Archive: Code of Athens.
- Grunig, L., & Toth, E. (2006). The ethics of communicating with and about difference in a changing society. In: Fitzpatrick, K., & Bronstein, C. (Eds), *Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy*, pp. 39-52. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- IPRA (1953). *Provisional Committee for the Establishment of an International Public Relations Association - Minutes of Meetings*, London, May 8, and Hastings, May 9, 1953.
- IPRA (1955). *Provisional Committee for the Establishment on an International Public Relations Association - Minutes of Meeting*, London, April 29, 1955.
- IPRA (1955). *Minutes of the Second meeting of the Council of the International P.R. Association*, The Hague, Holland, 14 October, 1955.
- IPRA (1956). *Minutes of the Third meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Paris, France, May 31-June 2, 1956.
- IPRA (1958). *Minutes of the Fifth meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Brussels, Belgium, June 23, 1958.
- IPRA (1960). *Minutes of the Seventh meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, The Hague, Holland, April 26, 1960
- IPRA (1961). *Minutes of the Eighth meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Venice, Italy, May 22, 1961.
- IPRA International Public Relations Association (1961, 2009). *Code of Venice*. IPRA. Retrieved from: <http://ipra.org/images/Code%20of%20Venice.pdf>.
- IPRA International Public Relations Association (1962). *Newsletter*, March 1962, 7-8.

- IPRA (1962). *Minutes of the Tenth meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Paris, France, May 8, 1962.
- IPRA (1963). *Minutes of the 12th meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Berlin, Germany, May 28-29, 1963.
- IPRA (1964). *Minutes of the 16th meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Montreal, Canada, November 8, 1964.
- IPRA (1965). *Minutes of the 17th meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Athens, Greece, May 12, 1965.
- IPRA (1966). *Minutes of the 19th and 20th meetings of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Barcelona, Spain, May 23-24, 1966.
- IPRA (1967). *Minutes of the 21st meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 9-10, 1967.
- IPRA (1968). *Minutes of the 22nd Meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Tehran, Iran, April 16-17, 1968.
- IPRA (1969). *Minutes of the 23rd meeting of the Council of the International Public Relations Association*, Dublin, Ireland, April 28-29, 1969.
- IPRA International Public Relations Association (1995). *A commitment to excellence*. Sweden: GormanGruppen.
- IPRA International Public Relations Association (2001). *IPRA codes and declarations*. Esher, UK: IPRA, 6-7.
- Matrat, L. (1964-68). *Correspondence on Code of Athens*. IPRA Archive: Code of Athens.
- Matrat, L. (1967). *Procedure recommended for the using the Code of Athens for the purpose of reaching a wider audience and obtaining prestige for our profession*. IPRA Archive: Code of Athens.
- Matrat, L. (1975). Doctrine européenne des relations publiques, condition du dialogue et de la participation. *Estudios de Comunicación Social y Relaciones Públicas*, 1, 29-33.
- Matrat, L. (1978). *The Code of Athens: A recommended procedure for reaching a wider audience and obtaining increased prestige for our profession*. *IPRA Newsletter*, 22(3), 15-17.
- PRCA – Public Relations Consultants Association, (undated). *PRCA Professional Charter, Public Affairs Code of Conduct, Healthcare Public Relations Code of Practice, Arbitration and Disciplinary Procedures*. London: PRCA. Retrieved from:

http://www.prca.org.uk/assets/files/AboutUs/Files/PRCA_Codes_of_conduct_and_Profes_sional_charter.pdf.

Traverse-Healy, T. (2011). *Interview with Professor Tom Watson, 21 September 2011*. Retrieved from: <http://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/resources/>.

Watson, T. (2011). *Archive of the International Public Relations Association*. Bournemouth: Bournemouth University. Retrieved from: <http://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/files/2011/11/IPRA-ARCHIVE.pdf> .

Wright, D. W. (2006). Advocacy across borders. In: Fitzpatrick, K., & Bronstein, C. (Eds), *Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy*, pp. 171-190. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Xifra, J. (2012). Public relations anthropologies: French theory, anthropology of morality and ethnographic practices. *Public Relations Review*, 38, 565-573.

APPENDIX 1

Code of Venice

Code of Venice on professional conduct

Adopted in 1961 and amended in 2009, the Code of Venice is an undertaking of professional conduct by members of the International Public Relations Association and recommended to Public Relations practitioners worldwide.

In the conduct of Public Relations practitioners shall:

Conduct towards Employers and Clients

1. Have a general duty of fair dealing towards employers or clients, past and present.
2. Not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those concerned.
3. Safeguard the confidences of both present and former employers or clients.
4. Not employ methods tending to be derogatory of another practitioner's employer or client.
5. Not, whilst performing services for an employer or client, accept fees, commission or any such consideration in connection with those services from anyone other than the employer or client without the express consent of the employer or client.
6. Not propose to a prospective client that fees or other compensation be contingent on the achievement of certain results nor enter into any fee agreement to the same effect.

Conduct towards the Public and the Media

7. Conduct themselves with respect to the public interest and with respect for the dignity of the individual.
8. Not engage in practice which tends to corrupt the integrity of any channel of communication.
9. Not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information.
10. At all times seek to give a faithful representation of the organisation which the practitioner serves.
11. Not create any organisation to serve an announced cause but which actually serves an undisclosed interest nor make use of any such existing organisation.

Conduct towards Colleagues

12. Not intentionally injure the professional reputation of another practitioner.
13. Not seek to supplant another practitioner with that practitioner's employer or client.

Conduct related to digital channels of communication (2009)

14. Act in accordance with the above with special care when using the Internet and other digital media as channels of communication.

Sanctions

IPRA members shall, in upholding this Code of Venice, agree to abide by and help enforce the disciplinary procedures of the International Public Relations Association in regard to any breaching of this Code.

Reference:

IPRA International Public Relations Association (1961, 2009). *Code of Venice*. IPRA. Available from: <http://ipra.org/images/Code%20of%20Venice.pdf>. Accessed 21.02.13.

APPENDIX 2

CODE OF ATHENS

Code of Athens introduction and text

INTERNATIONAL CODE OF ETHICS

Author: Lucien Matrat, Member Emeritus (France) Adopted by IPRA General Assembly, Athens, May 1965 and modified at Tehran, April 1968

CONSIDERING that all member countries of the United Nations Organisation have agreed to abide by its Charter which reaffirms "its faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person" and that having regard to the very nature of their profession, public relations practitioners in these countries should undertake to ascertain and observe the principles set out in this Charter,

CONSIDERING that, apart from "rights", human beings not only have physical or material needs but also intellectual, moral and social needs, and that their rights are of real benefit to them only insofar as these needs are essentially met,

CONSIDERING that, in the course of their professional duties and depending on how these duties are performed, public relations practitioners can substantially help to meet these intellectual, moral and social needs,

And lastly, CONSIDERING that the use of techniques enabling them to come simultaneously into contact with millions of people gives public relations practitioners a power that has to be restrained by the observance of a strict moral code.

(p.7) On all these grounds, the International Public Relations Associations hereby declares that it accepts as its moral charter the principles of the following Code of Ethics and that if, in the light of evidence submitted to the Council, a member of the Institute should be found to have infringed this Code in the course of his professional duties, he will be deemed to be guilty of serious misconduct calling for an appropriate penalty.

Accordingly, each member:

Shall endeavour:

To contribute to the achievement of the moral and cultural conditions enabling human beings to reach their full stature and enjoy the inalienable rights to which they are entitled under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

To establish communication patterns and channels which, by fostering the free flow of essential information, will make each member of the group feel that he/she is being kept informed, and

also give him an awareness of his/her own personal involvement and responsibility, and of his/her solidarity with other members;

To conduct himself always and in all circumstances in such a manner as to deserve and secure the confidence of those with whom he/she comes into contact;

To bear in mind that because of the relationship between his/her profession and the public, his/her conduct - even in private - will have an impact on the way in which the profession as a whole is appraised.

Shall undertake:

To observe, in the course of his/her professional duties, the moral principles and rules of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

To pay due regard to, and uphold, human dignity, and to recognise the right of each individual to judge for his/herself;

To establish the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for dialogue in its true sense, and to recognise the right of the parties involved to state their case and express their views;

To act, in all circumstances, in such a manner as to take account of the respective interests of the parties involved: both the interests of the organisation which he/she serves and the interests of the publics concerned;

To carry out his/her undertaking and commitments, which shall always be so worded as to avoid any misunderstanding, and to show loyalty and integrity in all circumstances so as to keep the confidence of his/her clients or employers, past or present, and of all the publics that are affected by his/her actions.

Shall refrain from: (p.8)

Subordinating the truth to other requirements;

Circulating information which is not based on established and ascertainable facts;

Taking part in any venture or undertaking which is unethical or dishonest or capable of impairing human dignity and integrity;

Using any manipulative methods or techniques designed to create subconscious motivations which the individual cannot control of his own free will and so cannot be held accountable for the action taken on them.

Reference: IPRA - International Public Relations Association (2001). *IPRA codes and declarations*. Esher, UK: IPRA, 6-7.